

The MEA Handbook

Guidelines on the employment and roles
of multicultural education aides
in Victorian Government schools



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1. Purpose

Multicultural education aides (MEAs) provide an invaluable service to schools, English as an additional language (EAL) learners and school communities.

Schools that receive EAL Index funding are provided with funds to employ both MEAs and EAL specialist teachers. Each year, funding is provided to around 500 government schools.

MEAs are an important link between families and the school, as they enable parents and families to communicate through their first language/s. MEAs also support EAL learners to reach their potential at school, by assisting them in the classroom.

The purpose of this handbook is to provide schools and MEAs with information about:

- policy and funding for the employment of MEAs
- advice on implementing effective MEA support
- information about effective MEA programs.

2. Funding

EAL Index funding is provided to staff EAL programs with appropriately qualified EAL teachers and Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) in schools that reach the EAL Index funding threshold. Allocations are based on the EAL student population of the school.

For further information, see:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/finance/Pages/srpref026.aspx>

Schools employ MEAs to support EAL students and their families and are responsible for decisions about the employment level and job roles of their MEAs.

3. Regional support

DET EAL Regional Program Officers (RPOs) are available in each region to support Victorian government schools to develop and implement effective EAL programs.

RPOs can assist schools with a range of matters in relation to their MEAs, including:

- assisting with EAL program development and implementation, including the role of the MEA in the EAL program
- assisting with school data analysis related to EAL learners and families who speak another language at home
- assisting with program and EAL learner evaluation, including the effectiveness of the MEA in EAL program support
- providing professional learning information for MEAs.

Information about policy and funding for EAL programs in Victorian government schools and links to contact details for EAL Regional Program Officers, resources and other services is available on the EAL section of the Department of Education and Training web site.

For further information, see:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/diversity/eal/Pages/default.aspx>

4. Role of an MEA

MEAs are employed by schools to support EAL learners, their families, and the families of other students who require language assistance when communicating with the school. The MEA's skills in a language or languages other than English enable them to act as a bridge between the school and families. They can also contribute to making the mainstream curriculum more responsive to Victoria's rich cultural heritage and diversity.

MEAs are able to assist with:

- effective communication between students and teachers in the classroom
- integrating EAL learners into school activities by helping them to understand school expectations and goals
- assisting teachers to understand the home cultures and the expectations families have of the school and of education in general
- assisting newly arrived families to settle into the school community.

The following outlines the kind of roles MEAs play in schools, and also includes areas for which they are not responsible.

4.1 Support for students and teachers

One of the main roles of an MEA is to assist EAL students in classroom programs. Under teacher supervision and guidance, MEAs can:

- support EAL students in their learning by explaining concepts or instructions in the learners' first or other language/s
- assist individual EAL students or groups of students in mainstream or EAL classes
- provide teachers with insights into students' cultural backgrounds and experiences
- assist with activities and excursions
- assist the teacher with the development of materials
- contribute cultural perspectives to curriculum content to make it more relevant to all students
- assist with the enrolment of new EAL students
- assist teachers to communicate with parents and other family members
- prepare simple (low-risk) written information for parents, such as notes, notices or basic information about the school. Professional translators should be used for sensitive information or when high-risk, complex or technical information is being communicated.

4.2 Support for parents and the community

The MEA is an important link between the school, parents and the local community. MEAs need guidance on the kinds of support that are appropriate for them to offer families. Within program and school guidelines, and under supervision where appropriate, MEAs are well placed to liaise with family members and members of the community to foster communication and to encourage parents to participate fully in the life of the school. They can:

- assist with communication between parents and the school
- foster links between families and the school
- liaise informally with community members
- encourage parents to take part in school events and activities, such as fundraising, school council or parents groups
- explain school policies and activities to students and parents

- make home visits with the Student Welfare Coordinator or the school administration
- provide liaison between parents, community organisations and other school staff
- develop contact with services and resources in the community so that parents can be informed of services available
- inform the school about family circumstances (with the family's permission) that may impact on student learning.

MEAs need to be made aware of their responsibilities regarding confidential and sensitive information. They may need to let parents know that any information that is given to them in their role as an MEA may be passed on to the school if it is in the best interests of the student/s involved.

4.3 Provision of language assistance

MEAs play a valuable role in using their language skills for direct communication with students and parents but should not be used as interpreters or translators. MEAs will not necessarily have formal qualifications or accreditation in interpreting or translation and are not employed as professional translators or interpreters.

Interpreting and translating are specialised skills. Professional interpreters and translators have undertaken extensive training at the tertiary level, are bound by a code of ethics and must be accredited by the national standards body, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), to practice in Australia. It is not only against government policy, but also not fair or ethical to expect an MEA to perform duties for which they are not qualified. While it is appropriate to have MEAs assist in everyday communications with parents and students, it is not appropriate to ask them to interpret or translate in situations where a professional interpreter or translator should be used.

MEAs are entitled to decline translating or interpreting work where a professional translator or interpreter should be engaged. For example, the language demands of interpreting between a psychologist and parents, or translating a complex curriculum document may be beyond the linguistic capacity required of an MEA as specialised knowledge and terminology is required. It is not appropriate to expect skills from an MEA that only professionally trained interpreters are expected to have.

Some MEAs have accreditation to the level required to be a qualified interpreter or translator, and may enjoy doing this type of work. However, it must be remembered that MEAs are not being paid the salary of a professional interpreter or translator, and must not undertake these responsibilities. Furthermore, the role of an interpreter and that of an MEA may be conflicting. For further information see Section 5.

5. Beyond the role of an MEA

5.1 Supervision of students

Teachers are responsible for the supervision of students. A teacher must be present at all times when an MEA is assisting students. The teacher is responsible for the overall supervision of classes and students.

5.2 Interpreting and translating services

The role of an MEA is quite distinct from, and much broader than, that of an interpreter. An MEA has commitments and responsibilities as a member of a school's staff, and for a range of support and problem solving activities. The MEA is also a member of a local multicultural community and may have conflicting interests between this role and their work role. An interpreter is there for one purpose only, to facilitate communication between school personnel and parents or other members of the school community.

Role differentiation: interpreter vs multicultural education aide

Interpreter	Multicultural education aide
Does not have or must not assume knowledge of student or family	Often has a close relation with family and students
Has a formal professional relationship with all parties in the school context	Often has direct and informal contact with student or parent
Is responsible for communication	Together with the school, is responsible for a range of outcomes
Aims to facilitate communication between two or more parties	Aims to support students and parents and help solve problems and issues
Is bound by a Code of Ethics which states that they must remain impartial while interpreting	May have an advocacy role
Has a clearly defined role to act as the voice of the two or more parties	Has a multi-faceted role – often with varied expectations

When translation is required, MEAs can assist with low-risk day-to-day written communication for the school community by preparing short simple letters, notices or sections of newsletters in language/s other than English. However, MEAs should only provide written information where the risk of miscommunication is low.

Points for MEAs to note

It is important that MEAs understand their role. They need to be aware that:

- they cannot perform two roles at once (as an MEA and as an interpreter) and that they may need to point this out to teachers or administrators
- it is important for MEAs to recognise their boundaries and understand that they must refuse to translate or interpret:
 - when the subject matter of an interview or procedure is of a high-risk nature and is beyond their professional competence as well as linguistic ability, e.g. a psychological assessment, a sensitive counselling situation or an encounter requiring a parent or student to provide consent
 - when the relationship they have with a parent or student means it is not appropriate to carry out an interpreting role.

MEAs can become trained interpreters and translators by gaining accreditation through accredited training programs or NAATI.

For more information, see https://www.naati.com.au/home_page.html

The Victorian Government provides scholarships and supports training opportunities for Victorian interpreters and translators in specified languages.

For further information, see:

<http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/improving-language-services/interpreter-scholarships>

Accessing professional interpreting and translating services

Schools with students and families from language backgrounds other than English need to ensure that information relating to school programs and student progress is made available to parents in their first language.

To facilitate this, DET provides schools with access to accredited interpreters, in line with Victorian government policy to help Victorians from culturally and linguistically diverse communities interact with government departments and agencies. The Department has a contract with VITS LanguageLoop to provide interpreting and translating services.

When schools require the services of a professional interpreter or translator, they can access them, within guidelines, through the free interpreting and translating services offered to schools.

The guidelines include the right for parents to access professional interpreting and translating services:

- when required to make significant decisions concerning their lives
- when being informed of their rights
- where essential information needs to be communicated to inform decision making, including obtaining informed consent.

For more information on access to interpreting and translating services, see: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/community/Pages/interpreting.aspx>

Bookings for on-site interpreters should be made with VITS LanguageLoop using the link available from this page.

Each school must use the username and password provided by VITS LanguageLoop. For further information on the online booking facility, or to confirm your school's login details, contact VITS LanguageLoop on (03) 9280 1955.

6. Effective classroom support

Effective MEAs assist EAL learners to learn English and to understand what is expected of them in the classroom. Effective MEAs act as a support for teachers as well as students by:

- following up observations on lack of student comprehension in the classroom
- encouraging positive behaviours in the school ground and in the classroom
- acting as a positive role model
- following up issues between teachers and students
- using the time the teacher has allocated for independent work to assist as many EAL learners from their linguistic background as possible
- working with careers practitioners to help students understand the kinds of educational pathways open to them.

When assisting students in the classroom, MEAs may find it useful to follow an educational approach common in Australia; that young people learn best through researching and problem solving. Teachers encourage students to work both independently and as part of teams or groups.

MEAs should:

- encourage students to think independently rather than providing students with the answers
- allow students to answer questions before explaining what is required
- encourage students to listen when the teacher and other students are contributing answers or explanations
- encourage students to research and complete tasks by themselves
- give short explanations in the background language when a topic is being introduced or when students do not understand required reading.

7. Staff roles in support of the MEA role

It is important that MEAs are clear about who their manager is and who they report to. They need to understand when they have responsibility for making their own decisions about their work and when they need to coordinate their work through their manager.

A performance plan, developed by an MEA's manager or coordinator in collaboration with MEAs, will help to clarify the role of the MEA. Performance plans need to be regularly discussed with MEAs and roles and responsibilities modified as school, student and families' needs change, and as MEAs' skills develop.

Regular meetings between the MEA, their manager or coordinator, and other staff with whom they work will help to give MEAs an understanding of their roles and responsibilities and ensure that they are clear about the accountability requirements of their job.

MEAs also need to be made aware of professional learning opportunities that may be available.

It is important that all staff:

- understand the roles that MEAs can be appropriately asked to perform
- have access to the duties and timetable of the MEA.

All the members of a school community have a role to play in promoting the effectiveness of the MEA in supporting EAL learners and their families. Staff roles in supporting MEAs will vary from school to school, but in general the following responsibilities are likely to be appropriate.

7.1 School administration

The school administration should:

- provide an induction course for MEAs new to the school, including information about their employment conditions, the operation of the school, services available, and the school curriculum
- appoint an appropriate staff member to manage and supervise the MEA and ensure that regular MEA program support meetings are held
- ensure that all members of the school community are familiar with the role, duties and timetable of the MEA
- ensure that a timetable is established collaboratively for the MEA
- ensure that accurate data is collected through enrolment procedures, interviews and meetings with parents, so that statistical information about the school's EAL population can be collated, and so that important factors that may influence students' learning are known. This information can be shared with MEAs as appropriate so that they better understand the school community they are working within.

7.2 MEA coordinator or manager

The MEA coordinator or manager should:

- hold regular MEA support meetings
- regularly review MEA timetables in relation to the needs of teachers and the school community
- assist teachers to plan and implement a program inclusive of EAL needs by providing staff with a collaboratively agreed timetable for the MEA to assist students in their classroom

- ensure that the role of the MEA is clear to all members of staff
- ensure that planning time is scheduled for teachers and MEAs to plan classroom work together
- hold regular performance review sessions with MEAs
- liaise with MEA coordinators/managers in other schools (where MEAs work across schools).

7.3 Classroom teacher or EAL teacher

Classroom teachers and EAL teachers should:

- inform the MEA about the organisation of classroom activities, curriculum content and handouts to be used well before the classroom session begins
- explain class rules and homework to the MEA so that consistent information about behaviour and expectations is given to students
- provide time for independent learning during which the MEA can support the students with their work
- provide opportunities for all students to share the diversity of their experiences, supported by the MEA
- develop classroom activities that relate to and build upon the experiences that students bring to the learning situation, with the assistance of an MEA
- ensure that multicultural perspectives are incorporated in all aspects of the classroom social and learning environments
- attend relevant EAL, multicultural or ethno-specific professional learning opportunities.

8. Employment

8.1 Conditions of employment

MEAs are employed as part of the Teaching Service in the education support class under Part 2.4 of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006.

Education support class positions cover a wide range of support services that include school administration and operations (e.g. human resources, finance, facilities, grounds maintenance), school support services (e.g. library, laboratory, information technology, out of school care, canteen), direct teaching and student support (e.g. classroom assistance to teachers, careers counselling, student health and wellbeing).

The education support class comprises two classification levels: Level 1 and Level 2.

Level 1 has five salary ranges and Level 2 has one salary range. The principal, having regard to the nature of the duties to be performed and the funding available in the school, determines the number of education support class positions and the classification level and remuneration range of those positions in accordance with the Dimensions of Work.

For more information about the Dimensions of Work, see:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/workm/Pages/dimensSSO.aspx>

8.2 Position descriptions

Position descriptions for MEAs will vary from school to school and will depend on the roles and responsibilities assigned by the school. These roles need to be developed by the school administration in response to the needs of teachers of EAL students for in-class support, as well as the needs of students and their families. The inclusion of a parent or community member on the selection panel can help to ensure an applicant's suitability to undertake the required tasks.

Following is an example of a position description written for an MEA working in a secondary school. It shows the range of roles that MEAs are typically called on to perform.

Key responsibilities

- *Communicate directly with families and support teachers and student welfare coordinators to communicate with families, and link the families with services.*
- *Support students in the classroom, explain teacher instructions and work requirements.*
- *Support teachers' general communication with students.*
- *Assist students and their families with the transition from one educational setting to another, for example, by gathering enrolment information.*
- *Translate basic school notices and communications to the local community.*
- *Assist with the preparation of permission forms and applications, for example, Youth Allowance or student travel card.*
- *Act as a resource to develop staff knowledge of the students' backgrounds and the issues they face.*
- *Help to involve parents in school activities and programs.*

Key selection criteria

- *Demonstrated ability to communicate in English and the required language(s), including the ability to accurately translate a range of basic school communications in the required language(s).*
- *Demonstrated ability to enhance the school's relationships with the families of the target language group(s), and, with the assistance of school staff, to help them to understand the Victorian education system.*
- *Demonstrated ability to work with students in a classroom setting.*
- *Demonstrated communication and interpersonal skills, including the ability to communicate with a wide range of individuals including staff, parents and the wider community.*
- *Ability to take direction and to work as part of a team.*

Requirements

- *No formal qualifications are required.*
- *Applicants will need to demonstrate proficiency in communication in English and the nominated language other than English.*
- *Applicants will work with students, staff, parents and community members.*
- *Applicants will need to have strong interpersonal skills and a preparedness to work with a diverse community in a range of settings.*

8.3 Career and professional development

Schools need to ensure that professional learning and career development opportunities are available to MEAs.

Schools should:

- ensure that all MEAs have an individual professional learning plan
- ensure MEAs are actively involved in curriculum days, contributing their knowledge while also learning about school programs
- provide MEAs with opportunities to develop technology skills
- encourage teachers to involve MEAs when planning activities and selecting content to be taught in the classroom, e.g. at short fortnightly meetings
- encourage MEAs to take part in professional learning provided within the region or state-wide.

From time to time other professional learning initiatives especially developed for MEAs, such as conferences and specialised training, may become available. These are usually promoted to schools through the Department's School Update. It is important the information about such initiatives is passed on to MEAs, and that they are encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities.

8.4 Interpreting and translating training

MEAs interested in gaining formal interpreting and translating qualifications should be encouraged to contact NAATI, the Australian body that sets and monitors standards.

Further details of the NAATI accreditation standards are available at: https://www.naati.com.au/home_page.html

9. Case studies

The roles and responsibilities of MEAs across different schools will vary considerably, depending on:

- the numbers of EAL students in classes, how newly arrived they are and how much intensive first language support they may need
- the way in which the EAL program operates to meet the needs of the EAL students
- the needs of the community.

9.1 Primary school

In this primary school there is an enrolment of 235 and a Student Family Occupation (SFO) index of 1.4. The percentage of EAL students is high at 56 per cent of the total school population. This school has decided to allocate funds to employ 2 MEAs to share a full-time position to support the two largest language background groups. The school has employed two part-time MEAs to cater for the Sudanese and Vietnamese students.

As well as their weekly program of assisting students in the classroom, the MEAs are involved in the following:

- weekly meetings with teachers and the assistant principal (who manages the day to day work of the MEAs) to discuss administrative matters, such as the timetable, to prepare for lessons and to provide professional development for each other
- helping to source first language material for classroom topics and make classroom resources
- assisting in planning and running a transition program in Term 4 for the following year's Prep intake, that runs for 10 weeks. The MEAs help the students to settle in and help parents to understand the expectations of the school, and the role they can play in their children's education.

Sample primary MEA timetable

The following sample timetable for a primary school indicates the types of tasks and duties allocated to either one full-time or several part-time MEAs, depending on the number of EAL students and their language backgrounds. The timetable was developed in collaboration with MEAs, teachers and the MEAs' manager or coordinator.

The timetable is flexible and changes during the year and from term to term, depending on the needs of the school. For example, during parent teacher interview time in June and December the MEAs spend more time helping parents to arrange interviews. During November they are involved in the Year 6 to 7 Transition program, and in December in the Prep Transition program.

The time allocated for the different aspects of the MEA program for a week:

Times	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.30 – 9.30	Resource making	Activity preparation	Translation of basic notices for school activities	Preparing parent newsletter item in first language	Student enrolment or parent meeting
9.30 – 11.00	Student support in literacy activities Year 1B	Student support in literacy activities Prep A	Student support in literacy activities Year 3	Student support in literacy activities Year 5	Student support in literacy activities Year 4
11.00 – 11.30	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess

Times	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
11.30 – 1.30	Student support in numeracy activities Prep B	Student support in numeracy activities Year 5D	Student support in numeracy activities Year 2C	Support in EAL class Year 5/6	Support in EAL class Year 3/4
1.30 – 2.30	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
2.30 – 3.30	Student support with integrated unit Year 5C	Student support in science activities Year 6A	Student support in library session Year 2	Student support in art class Year 5/6	Student support in sport activities Year 3/4
3.30 – 4.30	Staff meeting	Planning meeting with EAL coordinator	Community or parent meeting	Planning meeting with classroom teachers	Resource making

Note:

- MEAs attend excursions and camps as appropriate, as part of their work allocation
- when MEAs are required to work outside of their normal hours, they are offered time in lieu or payment for the extra hours worked
- when necessary, MEAs ring parents to follow up on student absences or on school notices not returned, or to gather additional information about students.

9.2 Secondary school

In this secondary school there is a total population of 715 students and a Student Family Occupation (SFO) index of 0.6. The percentage of EAL students is low at 6.4 per cent of the total school population, one MEA is employed with a 0.3 time allocation. This school has recently enrolled a new cohort of students requiring EAL support. The language background of the MEA represents the largest group of EAL students who have the greatest need for literacy support.

In addition to the proportion of EAL funding given to employ MEAs, schools are able to allocate additional funds from other sources to increase the time allocation of MEAs. This school has decided to use other equity funding sources to increase the MEA allocation. The following short case study shows how this school decided to use its MEA funding.

The weekly program of assisting students in classrooms consists of:

- encouraging students and explaining instructions, activities and assessment procedures
- explaining new or difficult concepts or vocabulary
- encouraging positive behaviour and ensuring that students understand class and school rules
- helping to source first language material for classroom topics, and making classroom resources.

The MEAs are also involved in the following activities:

- weekly meetings with teachers and the assistant principal (who manages the day to day work of the MEAs) to discuss administrative matters, such as the timetable, to prepare for lessons and to provide professional development for each other
- delivering a transition program for students from refugee backgrounds who have little or no prior literacy in their first language – the first language assistance that the MEA gives students in this program is vital to its success
- supporting VCAL literacy and numeracy classes for students from a refugee or low literacy background

- offering a career guidance program for students in conjunction with the careers practitioner
- assisting the Student Welfare Coordinator with the drug and alcohol education program.

Sample secondary MEA timetable

The timetable below shows the range of roles of one full time MEA in one particular secondary school. The timetable was developed in collaboration with MEAs, teachers and the MEAs' manager. The timetable is flexible and changes during the year and from term to term, depending on the needs of the school. For example, during parent teacher interview time in June and December the MEAs spend more time helping parents to arrange interviews, and at the end of each year MEAs are involved in parent information sessions about subject selections and careers pathway planning.

The time allocated for the different aspects of the MEA program for a week looks like this:

Times	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.15 – 8.45	Newsletter translation Parent meetings	Materials preparation	Finding class resources	Parent phone calls	Student enrolment
8.45 – 9.35	Maths Year 9A	Health Year 8C	Transition program	Transition program: pathway planning with careers coordinator	VCAL literacy class
9.35 – 10.30	History Year 8A	Science Year 9 B	Transition program	History Year 8A	VCAL literacy class
10.30 – 10.50	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess
10.50 – 11.40	Transition program	Science Year 7A	Planning meeting with EAL	Science Year 10B	VCAL numeracy class
11.40 – 12.30	Transition program	Welfare coordinator meeting	Transition program	Science Year 10B	VCAL numeracy class
12.30 – 1.15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1.15 – 2.10	Transition program	Maths Year 10A	Transition program	English Year 7A	ICT – Year 10 elective
2.10 – 3.05	Transition program	Maths Year 10B	Transition program	Science Year 7A	ICT – Year 10 elective
3.05 – 4.15	Staff meeting	Year level meeting	Maths/science meeting	Literacy team meeting	Materials preparation

Note:

- MEAs attend excursions and camps as appropriate, as part of their work allocation.

- When MEAs are required to work outside of their normal hours, they are offered time in lieu or payment for extra hours worked.
- When necessary, MEAs ring parents in the morning, for example they may need to:
 - follow up on student absences
 - follow up on school notices not returned
 - gather additional information about students.
- At the weekly meeting, MEAs and teachers prepare for lesson organisation, content and handouts.